

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

M.Sumathy,

Reg no: 17211194012008,

Full-time PhD Research Scholar,

Research Department of English,

Sadakathullah Appa College,

Tirunelveli - 627 011

(Aff to) Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012,

Tamilnadu, India.

msg2suma@gmail.com

Dr. K. Shanmuga Sundara Raj,

Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor,

Department of English,

Government Arts & Science College,

Kovilpatti - 628 503 (Aff to)

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,

Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012

Tamilnadu, India

drckssraj@gmail.com

Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave – An Excruciating Tale of Kidnap

Abstract: Humans are emotional creatures, and storytelling allows them to assume information more easily because it connects that information to emotions. Storytelling is as old as human

existence, and it's common to every known culture. Before man learned to write, he had to rely on his memory to convey, communicate, or express anything. A good storyteller has to be a good listener and an observer so that it would be easy for him to narrate a story with the coherence. And it would be easy for him to convey his ideas to the audience who were eager to know every exciting bit of information in the story. A narrative or story is a report of connected events, presented in a series of written or spoken words. Narrative forms include autobiography, biography, captivity narrative, epic, fable, fantasy, tale, fiction, legend, memoir, myth, novel, play, quest narrative, short story, etc. When biography or autobiography tells the life of a person, memoir tells a story from the life of a person. And a memoir is a collection of memories written by an individual about the events or instances which happened in the author's personal life. The chosen narrative for analysis *Twelve Years a Slave* is a memoir of Solomon Northup as told to and edited by David Wilson and published before the Civil War, in 1853. This article tries to analyze Northup's excruciating tale of kidnap, his experience as a slave for twelve years in various plantations and his rescue and tries to help the readers understand racism and slave's life from the victim's point of view.

Keywords: Slave narratives, kidnap, slave's pen, slave traders, slave owners, field works, cotton plantation, sugar plantation, subjugation, overseer

Article:

Introduction

Slave narrative collection is a group of autobiographical accounts of the common slave experience in the United States in the antebellum South. It offers the personal account of a slave's life under the "peculiar institution" called slavery and the psychological traumas as well in their own words. Slave narratives served as an abolitionist tool and an outlet which helped

the slaves to state their independence and to get rid of their mental agonies. The slave narratives not only provided the details of the slavery but also provided the data of the perspectives of the voiceless masses called slaves, who seldom left written evidence from their own life history to the rest of the world. And these narratives served as a platform for those who had been subjugated to speak for themselves. Slave narratives also initiated the struggle of African Americans, in the United States, to claim their rights as human beings during the Civil Rights movement and the Black Protest Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. And it challenged the racial inequalities that have pervaded and degraded African Americans in the large American society and produced awareness among the oppressed people. *Twelve Years a Slave* is one of the famous slave narratives of that time written by Solomon Northup to explicate the public how slavery ruined the innocent people's life. It tells his story from the perspective of a free man and a slave.

An excruciating story of kidnap:

According to the narrative of Solomon Northup, he was a freeman, enjoying his freedom for more than thirty years. As his forefathers or ancestors serviced a family with the name Northup at Hoosic in Rensselaer County, New York, Solomon Northup also bared that same identity. His father Mintus Northup was a former slave in Rhode Island. After the death of his master, Mintus Northup became a freeman as per the will of his master. Later, their family moved to Minerva, Essex County, New York, where Solomon Northup was born in 1808. Northup says that, though his father was a slave, he was respected for his industry and integrity. He had never sought any kind of employment or help from his children in those works. And never let his children suffer like other African children. In spite of their poor condition, he offered them the education which was refused for many black children of their status. And also he imbibed the sentiments of morality and belief in God in their little minds.

Until his marriage, Northup was engaged in helping his father in all labours of the farm and spending his leisure time with books or playing the violin.

When Northup was twenty-one years old, he was married to Anne Hampton and started his married life at Fort Edward village. As he was well versed of all labours of the farm, the rewards of his labours helped him in leading a peaceful and comfortable life in the farm of Kingsbury. In 1834, they moved to Saratoga Springs. While Anne worked as a cook in a hotel in Sandy Hill, he performed hard day's labour in Troy and Saratoga Railroad and worked as a driver for a hack in the village of Saratoga Springs. By that time he was a father of three children namely Elizabeth, Margaret, Alonzo. While residing there he had the habit of purchasing things for his family from the stores of Mr. Cephas Parker and Mr. William Perry, which helped him later in his life. Because they were the gentlemen who directed his letter from the place of his captivity to the hands of the officials and helped him in his deliverance from slavery.

Solomon Northup continued his life with his family in Saratoga until 1841. Though they led a comfortable life they were not prospered. So, he was seeking a better opportunity to earn some more. At that time two gentlemen with respectable appearance namely Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton approached him. They informed him that, they were from a circus company situated in the city of Washington, searching for a violin expert to perform on an occasional exhibition. They also informed him that,

“if I would accompany them as far as New York, they would give me one dollar for each day's services, and three dollars in addition for every night I played at their performances, besides sufficient to pay the expenses of my return from New York to Saratoga” (Narr of Solo, 30).

At once Northup accepted their tempting offer, took a set of dress and his violin and immediately joined them. Assuming that his absence would be for a brief time, he went with

them without informing anything to his wife or anyone nearby. He was very happy about the money he was going to earn. They took him to New York and then to Washington saying that he would be offered more if he continued with them and made him accept their offer. Their conversation was in the way that it made Solomon Northup believes them to such an extent that procuring free papers was unnecessary. But still, they issued free papers purchased from the Custom's office saying that everything was done for his safety, as they were entering into a slave State, which gave him confidence without any reserve. They also gave him enormous money for his performance and advised him to travel in the morning, as it would not be safe for him to travel alone. And made him stay in the sleeping room behind the hotel and offered liquor to drink which made him extremely ill and faint.

Stripping of identity:

When Northup regained his consciousness, he found himself chained without coat or hat in a dark room to a large ring on the floor. When he tried to collect his thoughts he realized that, "I had not only been robbed of liberty but that my money and free papers were also gone!" (Narr of Solo, 38) . When he tried to prove that he was a free man, "a resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Solomon Northup" (Narr of Solo, 43) to the slave dealer, he declared that Northup was a slave, and he had been bought from Georgia with an emphatic oath and accused him as a black liar and a runaway from Georgia. He was beaten continuously until he accepted himself a slave. Northup writes, "A man with a particle of mercy in his soul would not have beaten even a dog so cruelly" (Narr of Solo, 45). And he was warned that, if he ever revealed that he was a free man kidnapped from his country, then the castigation he had received was nothing in comparison with what would follow. With all these instructions Northup with other slaves was made to quickly hustle into a steamboat. As soon as the bell rang, it began to carry them to the unknown destiny.

Dwayne Wong is the contributor and author of several books on African and African Diaspora history, in *Why Our African Identity Matters* states,

“One of the challenges that people of African descent continue to face from the days of slavery is the question of identity. Many of us still do not know who we truly are. This was largely done by design. The slave masters stripped Africans of their names, their languages, their culture and customs, and of their history. Not only this, but Africa has always been depicted as a negative place filled with savages and cannibals” (Dwayne, 1).

Slaves in holding cells

The place where Solomon Northup was confined in the city of Washington until he was sold to New Orleans merchant was known as James H. Burch's slave pen. James H. Burch was a brutal slave trader in Washington. It was a small building and yard, similar to a barnyard, used in the business of buying, selling, and trading slaves in the main streets of Washington. It appeared like a private quiet residence for a stranger outside. It was constructed in a way that no one would dream of its execrable use. The enslaved people who were bought by the merchants for wholesale were kept either in the Merchant's yard or in the Slave's pen. They would be restrained in that place until they were sold to the purchasers. Olaudah Equiano in his “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, an African,” describes the merchant's yard where every slave was examined thoroughly by the buyers and the merchants. It was the place meant for selling the slaves and the slaves were called as parcels. The buyers could make chances to choose their parcels. Northup and the rest of the slaves were driven from James H. Burch's slave pen to the Burch's associate, Theophilus Freeman's slave pen. And Freeman changed Northup's name to "Platt," thereby erasing any connection to his past. Lilian Diarra in *Ghana's Slave Castles: The Shocking Story of the Ghanaian Cape Coast* says,

“Between 1482 and 1786, clusters of castles and forts were erected along the 500 kilometre-long coastline of Ghana between Keta in the East and Benin in the west. As early as the 1500s, the settlers’ interest turned to the slave trade in light of the growing demand for human labour in the New World (the Americas and the Caribbean). From holding gold, ivory and other wares, the castles gradually imprisoned slaves, who were reduced to yet another commodity” (Diarra. Culture trip,1).

Solomon’s struggle to regain his freedom:

While Solomon Northup was living at the village of Saratoga as a freeman, he had chances to meet many slaves, who had accompanied their masters from the South. Their external appearance showed that they were leading apparently an easy life, but Northup found every one of them having the secret desire for liberty and ardent anxiety to escape slavery. When Northup himself had become a slave, he also had the same kind of feelings and secret desire for freedom. All his efforts to become a free man were all in vain. Only after twelve years, he could obtain his freedom. He remained a slave until he met a Canadian carpenter working on his plantation called Samuel Bass, who helped get word about his captivity to his friends and wife in New York. Northup was sold to William Prince Ford by Burch’s associate Theophilus Freeman near Bayou Boeuf of the Red River in Northern Louisiana. He was a kind preacher; he liked Northup’s working skills and sincerity. Due to his financial difficulties, he sold Northup along with some other slaves to John M. Tibeats. Under Tibeats, Solomon Northup underwent several unpredictable treatments. At one instance, Tibeats even tried to kill Northup. But fortunately he was saved by his former master Ford. Again Tibeats sold Northup to the most ferocious master Edwin Epps, under whom Northup remained a slave for almost

ten years. Northup met his deliverer Bass in 1852, who came to do some work for Epps, heard his excruciating story of kidnap and helped him to regain his freedom. Northup writes like this,

“Mr. William Perry or Mr. Cephas Parker: “Gentlemen- It having been a long time since I have seen or heard from you, and not knowing that you are living, it is with uncertainty that I write to you, but the necessity of the case must be my excuse.... Having been born free, just across the river from you, I am certain you must know me, and I am here now a slave. I wish you to obtain free papers for me, and forward them to me at Marksville, Louisiana, Parish of Avoyelles, and oblige- Yours, Solomon Northup” (Narr of Solo, 171).

Along with the letter of Solomon Northup, Bass wrote several letters at his request to Northup’s Friends, providing details of his location at Bayou Boeuf, in hopes of gaining his liberty.

Conclusion:

Being an innocent victim of slavery, Solomon Northup tries to portray its violent face which has the ability to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of the slaveholders as well as the slaves. Northup says, “Daily witness of human suffering – listening to the agonizing screeches of the slave- beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash- bitten and torn by dogs- dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin” (Narr of Solo, 124) instead of developing the humanity in the slaveholders, had in turn dehumanized them. The continuous pricking and poaching effects of slavery and sudden deprivation of freedom made Northup think more about his liberty. At the end of the story, Northup was reunited with his family, whereas most of his friends were left in the same condition, under the same master, without any changes in their life. This made Solomon Northup become an abolitionist and publish his life as a slave

narrative to inspire the abolitionist movements and work for the liberation of the suffering people. Thus the narrative of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* became an effective tool in projecting the evil effects of slavery to the public by seeking their attention towards the suffering people.

Works Cited

Northup, Solomon. Sue L. Eakin, and Joseph Logsdon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968. Print.

Northup, Solomon. (2018). *Twelve years a Slave*. Global Grey.

Diarra, Lilian. 24 January 2017. Culture Trip. Ghana's Slave Castles: The Shocking Story of the Ghanaian Cape Coast. <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/ghana/articles/ghana-s-slave-castles-the-shocking-story-of-the-ghanaian-cape-coast/> Accessed on 05.02.2019.

Wong, Dwayne. Dec 06, 2017. HUFFPOST. Why Our African Identity Matters https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dwayne-wong-omowale/why-our-african-identity-matters_b_8947996.html. Accessed on 05.02.2019.

References

- Douglass, Frederick, 1818-1895. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. Print.
- Equiano, Olaudah, 1745-1797. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001. Print.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813-1897. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Edited by L. Maria Child. London: Hodson and Son, 22, Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn, 1862. Print.